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AUTHOR Denniston, Denie; Imel, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Changing careers during adulthood has been recognized only recently as a natural part of the development of adult life. A study estimated that 36 percent of all Americans are in some stage of the career transition process. Career changes are becoming increasingly common for women, for workers whose skills have become obsolete, for individuals experiencing a shift in values, and for older workers. Reasons for career changes are either internal or external. Internal or psychological factors are related to changes in individuals or their families. External factors are often related to economic or technological changes in the environment and the work place. Many adults have trouble making career transitions due to: (1) lack of motivation; (2) lack of access to information about alternative careers and opportunities; (3) a narrow idea of available jobs; (4) limited education/training; (5) lack of funds; and (6) lack of counseling. A variety of educational and support services can be provided to help overcome these problems. These services can be delivered effectively through comprehensive guidance centers, residential programs, and brokering services (resource and referral services). This fact sheet includes a bibliography of four resources, most of which are available from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system. (DC)

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Adults in Career Transition.
OVERVIEW: ERIC Fact Sheet No. 20.

by

Deni Deniston & Susan Imel

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult,
Career, and Vocational Education

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ERIC OVERVIEW

FACT SHEET No. 20

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

ADULTS IN CAREER TRANSITION

Introduction

Changing careers during adulthood has only recently been recognized as a natural part of the continuous growth and development that extends through a lifetime. Frequently, adults who change careers are taking positive steps in terms of their personal and work development, thus bringing about increased job satisfaction, salary, self-esteem, and social mobility. A recent study estimated that 36 percent of all Americans are in some stage of career transition process.

Career changes are becoming increasingly common for the following groups of people:

- Women entering or reentering the work force
- Workers whose skills have become obsolete due to changing technology
- Individuals experiencing a shift in values related to work and its effect on their life-style
- Older workers who wish to "retool" their skills in order to remain in the work force

Factors Contributing to Career Transitions

A number of factors are influencing adult career transitions. Economic changes are altering the environment in which people live and work. Unemployment, underemployment, inflation, and shrinking take-home pay have resulted in job upheavals, and have contributed to the increase in two-income and single-parent families. Technological changes are also affecting career transitions. Changes in technology have made some jobs obsolete, but at the same time have created new work and new careers.

Individual decision factors have also changed, resulting in new life-styles and career perceptions. Such factors as changes in personal value systems, advances in birth control, increased leisure time, expansion of the middle class, and movement toward the social liberation of women and minorities have all contributed to career transitions. For example, most women now expect to have a career, and many are trying to make up for lost time. All of these forces tend to create an environment in which change of life-style, change of career, and new perspectives about daily existence can flourish. Individuals are encouraged to change, and advice and assistance for making changes are more readily available.

Characteristics of Career Changers

Individuals making career changes appear to have distinguishing individual characteristics and life circumstances. There are two general reasons for career change: internal (psychological) or external (primarily economic). Internal or psychological factors are linked to changes in individuals or their families, while externally based factors often relate to changes in the economy or the work place. Thus, motivation for career change generally comes from either changing personal needs or changes in the work setting.

Changing needs during adulthood may create new values, interests, and life-style preferences. Individuals may find their work is incompatible with new interests and values. Changes in personal life such as divorce, ill or aging parents, or an end to child rearing responsibilities may also cause adults to reassess their present careers. In other cases, adults may experience frustration on the job. Although their jobs may provide adequate income and security, the work may seem meaningless. In addition, adults may realize that they can no longer perform their jobs because of technological, physical, or psychological changes.

Although adults may be motivated to change careers, change is not likely to occur unless some preconditions are present and existing constraints can be overcome. Individuals need to have access to information about alternative careers, access to training, information about career opportunities, and/or association with other career changers. Family circumstances must be flexible enough not only to permit adequate time and money to pursue needed training, but also to provide the necessary psychological and emotional support. An individual's self-concept must also permit him or her to take the risks involved in making a career change.

Services for Career Changers

Many adults have trouble making career transitions due to the following factors:

- Lack of motivation
- Lack of access to information
- Narrow idea of available jobs
- Limited education/training background
- Lack of funds
- Lack of counseling

To help adults overcome these conditions, a variety of educational and support services can be provided to assist them with career transitions. Some of these are described briefly.

Accessibility to Services. A key factor in accessibility is the willingness of institutions to provide services and support for career changers. Educational institutions, for

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example, may need to admit individuals who are older than the average student, accept dated educational credentials, and grant credit for life experience in order to accommodate the needs of career changers. Employers can assist by allowing individuals release time from their jobs to attend educational programs.

Training. Many adults see training as a vehicle leading to career change. In a recent study of adults in transition, Arbeiter et al. (1978) found that a majority of adults expressed interest in either a vocational or professional training program. Since adults in transition may be concerned that the programs they have selected will lead directly to their new career, particular attention needs to be paid to the design of training programs. For those who feel they have limited time to advance in their newly chosen occupations, delays encountered during training can be particularly frustrating. Ideally, training programs should be individually tailored to the goals of career changers. It should also be remembered that career changers are usually interested in attaining specific credentials rather than completing degree programs.

Financial Assistance. Adults in career transition frequently have financial responsibilities that make it difficult to pursue training opportunities. Although financial support may be available through employers or government sources, individuals frequently are unaware of its existence or do not know how to apply for it.

Information. Arbeiter et al. (1978) found that adults in transition were primarily interested in information on available jobs, educational or training programs, sources of financial aid, and facts about personal abilities relating to educational success. Other studies have shown that many adults interested in making career changes lack even the most basic information about career options. It appears, then, that adults need information on jobs, training, and matching their skills and aptitudes to vocational options before selecting a new occupational area. Information services for career changers may be provided in a variety of community settings, including libraries and educational institutions.

Counseling. Adults in career transition need assistance in making and implementing occupational decisions. They need to understand not only the career and educational options open to them, but also the risks and costs involved in making a career change. Counseling can help develop decision-making and job-finding skills and can provide emotional support and assistance in locating information. It can also help adults think about and develop a realistic and flexible career plan. A variety of counseling activities are appropriate for use with career changers, including (1) administering standardized tests of vocational interests and aptitudes; (2) providing information on up-to-date and accurate labor market projections and training opportunities; (3) arranging opportunities to talk with other adults in career transition; and (4) offering personal counseling. Effective counseling may be the key to helping adults overcome barriers so that they can take advantage of the options open to them.

Program Models

The services described previously can be effectively delivered through one of the following models.

Comprehensive Guidance Centers. Comprehensive centers consolidate services that might otherwise be offered through a number of agencies. Such centers provide a range of guidance services for adults making career transitions, including assessment, counseling, job readiness, and job placement.

Residential Programs. Although residential programs are remedial in nature, they have far-reaching and long-term effects on the career development of young adults. The Job Corps is an example of a residential program that provides career development assistance through assessment, job training, job exploration, and job readiness.

Brokering Services. Also known as resource and referral, brokering concentrates on helping adults identify resources and on providing career planning assistance in order to help them use the resources identified in an effective manner. Services provided through brokering include information, assessment, referral, counseling, outreach, and advocacy services.

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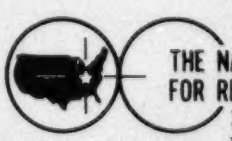

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FOR RESEARCH IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
The Ohio State University, 1960 Kenny Road, Columbus, Ohio 43210
Tel. (614) 486-3655 Cable: CTVOC:OSU/Columbus, Ohio
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